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Working Paper

Communication Across Cultures: From Cultural Awareness to Reconciliation of the Dilemmas

Nota di Lavoro, No. 78.2003

Provided in Cooperation with:

Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei (FEEM)

Suggested Citation: Merk, Vincent (2003) : Communication Across Cultures: From Cultural Awareness to Reconciliation of the Dilemmas, Nota di Lavoro, No. 78.2003, Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei (FEEM), Milano

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**Communication Across Cultures:
From Cultural Awareness to
Reconciliation of the Dilemmas**

Vincent Merk
NOTA DI LAVORO 78.2003

JULY 2003

KNOW – Knowledge, Technology, Human Capital

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The special issue on *Economic Growth and Innovation in Multicultural Environments (ENGIME)* collects a selection of papers presented at the multidisciplinary workshops organised by the ENGIME Network.

The ENGIME workshops address the complex relationships between economic growth, innovation and diversity, in the attempt to define the conditions (policy, institutional, regulatory) under which European diversities can promote innovation and economic growth.

This batch of papers has been presented at the second ENGIME workshop: *Communication across Cultures in Multicultural Cities*.

ENGIME is financed by the European Commission, Fifth RTD Framework Programme, Key Action Improving Socio-Economic Knowledge Base, and it is co-ordinated by Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei (FEEM).

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Communication across Cultures: From Cultural Awareness to Reconciliation of the Dilemmas

Summary

In this globalising world there is a growing need for understanding different types and forms of interaction between people in intercultural environments, i.e. working places, cities, etc. This implies that people refer more and more to various communication models and practices to fully master communication across cultures. These models ultimately lead to applying best practices in intercultural communication. One of the most popular models is the one developed by Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner. In this paper we first review the concept of culture related to this model. Second, we present the 7 dimensions of the model. Finally, we review the reconciliation theory as presented by Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, Reconciliation model, Dilemmas, Intercultural context

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Nowadays many elements that constitute culture (values, norms, attitudes, behaviours, means of communication, etc.) become global, and consequently there is a growing need for understanding different types and forms of interaction between people in intercultural environments, i.e. in international working places, multilingual and multicultural cities. This implies that people refer more and more to various values, norms and communication models and practices to fully master communication across cultures. These models ultimately lead to applying best practices in intercultural communication. One of the most popular models is the one developed by Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner that we will present in this article. To fully capture this model, it is necessary to first apply a three-step approach, known as the 3 R's:

a) **Recognition**: developing cultural awareness, i.e. knowing who you are on the intercultural world map, to what culture you belong, of what culture you are a product. Besides, it is also the stage in which one must recognise and become aware of the fact that there are cultural differences in the world of international cooperation. A common attitude of defence is to ignore the differences, with all the related risks when things go wrong. Recognising the differences with the culture or context involved is also important in this stage. This can be done by doing desk research out of books, brochures, stories, Internet, etc. Also by speaking to those involved in previous comparable situations in the host culture, identifying a cultural coach, getting the right human resources and the like.

b) **Respect** for the otherness, showing tolerance and respect for the other party and the other culture, i.e. developing empathy and being able to do what is commonly known as putting yourself in the other person's shoes to fully understand his/her attitude, know the norms and values, etc. It also implies being curious, open-minded, flexible, etc. How to reach this stage of development? Personal attitudes and intercultural skills to develop by training and experiences are necessary.

c) **Reconciliation** of the differences. It means reconciliation of the extremes, of the dilemmas managers are facing in their work and not imitation of the host culture's norms, values and attitudes. This process will ultimately make it possible to find and apply best (communication) practices. The final goal is to find a new win-win situation, in opposition to a compromise that means losing some of one's identity or values.

What is **culture** in relation to this model? As we all know, there are many interpretations of culture. It can be examined from a point of view of many disciplines: anthropology, linguistics, sociology, communication, fine arts, etc. Here we suggest looking at culture from a special perspective, to compare it with an **onion**. Culture, like an onion, consists of layers that can be peeled off layer per layer. In culture as we see it, we can distinguish three layers:

- The **outer layer** is what people primarily associate with culture: the visual reality of behaviour, clothes, food, language, housing, etc. In

short it is all about what we perceive with our five senses. This is the level of explicit culture.

- The **middle layer** refers to the norms and values that a community holds: what is considered right and wrong (norms) or good and bad (values). Norms are often external and reinforced by social control. Values tend to be more internal than norms. Society doesn't have many means of controlling their enforcement. Values and norms structure the way people in a particular culture behave. But they are not visible, despite their influence on what happens at the observable surface. This is also the level of some general rules which one must obey: driving on the left of the road in the UK is not subject to discussion, it is the "take it or leave it" level of culture.
- The **inner layer** is the deepest: the level of implicit culture. Understanding the core of the culture onion is the key to successfully working with other cultures. The core consists of basic assumptions (things like traditions, religion, various beliefs, family values, beauty, etc.), series of rules and methods to deal with the regular problems that it faces. For an outsider these basic assumptions are very difficult to recognize.

This onion model compares best with the famous metaphor of the iceberg: what is visible, tangible of culture is above sea level. It is the outer and some of the middle layer of the onion, all the rest is below sea level.

Every culture has developed its own set of basic assumptions. These basic assumptions can be measured by dimensions. Each **dimension** is like a continuum. Cultures differ in how they deal with these dimensions, but they do not differ in needing to make some kind of response. Every culture distinguishes itself from others by the specific solutions it chooses to certain problems that reveal themselves as dilemmas (double proposition). It is convenient to look at these problems under three headings: those that arise from our relationships with other people; those that relate to time and those that relate to nature, our environment. From the solutions different cultures have chosen to these universal problems, we can further identify seven fundamental dimensions of culture:

- 1) **Universalism vs. Particularism**: what is more important - rules or relationships?
- 2) **Individualism vs. Communitarianism**: do we function in a group or as an individual?
- 3) **Affective vs. Neutral cultures**: do we show our emotions?
- 4) **Specific vs. Diffuse cultures**: how far do we get involved?
- 5) **Achievement vs. Ascription**: do we have to prove ourselves to receive status or is it given to us?
- 6) **Time perception** – importance of past, present and future; Sequential vs. Synchronic cultures: do we do things one at a time or several things at once?
- 7) **Relation to nature** - Internal vs. External control: do we control our environment or work (in harmony) with it?

1) **Universalism vs. Particularism**

People in **universalistic** cultures share the belief that general rules, codes, values and standards take precedence over particular needs and claims of friends and relations. In a universalistic society, the rules apply equally to the whole "universe" of members. Any exception weakens the rule. *Dura lex, sed lex*. For example: the rule that you should bear truthful witness in a court of law, or give your honest judgment to the insurance company concerning a payment it is about to make to you, is more important here than particular ties of friendship or family. Of course, it is not that in universalistic cultures, particular ties are completely unimportant, but the universal truth, the law, is considered logically more significant than these relationships.

Particularistic cultures, on the contrary, see the ideal culture in terms of human friendship, extraordinary achievement and situations; and in intimate relationships. The "spirit of the law" is deemed more important than the "letter of the law". Obviously there are rules and laws in particularistic cultures too; but these merely codify here how people relate to each other. Rules are needed - if only to be able to make exceptions to them for particular cases - but we need to be able to count on our friends.

2) **Individualism vs. Communitarianism**

Each one of us is born alone. In a predominantly **individualistic** culture people place the individual before the community. Individual happiness, fulfilments, and welfare set the pace. People are expected to decide matters largely on their own and to take care primarily of themselves and their immediate family. In a particularistic culture, the quality of life for all members of society is seen as directly dependent on opportunities for individual freedom and development. The community is judged by the extent to which it serves the interest of individual members.

Contrarily, each one of us is born into a family, a neighbourhood, a community, which existed before we did, and will continue after we die. In a predominantly **communitarian** culture people place the community before the individual. It is the responsibility of the individual to act in ways that serve society. By doing so, individual needs will be taken care of naturally. The quality of life for the individual is seen as directly dependent on the degree to which he takes care of his/her fellow man, even at the cost of individual freedom. The individual is judged by the extent to which he/she serves the interest of the community.

3) **Affective vs. Neutral cultures**

In an **affective** culture people do not object to a display of emotions. It is not considered necessary to hide feelings and to keep them inside. Affective cultures may interpret the less explicit signals of a neutral culture as less important. They may be ignored or even go unnoticed.

Neutral culture people, on the contrary, are taught that it is incorrect to show one's feelings overtly. This doesn't mean they do not have feelings, it just means that the degree to which feeling may become manifest is limited. They accept and are aware of feelings, but are in control of them. Neutral cultures may think the louder signals of an affective culture too excited, and over-

emotional. In neutral cultures, showing too much emotion may erode your power to interest people.

4) **Specific vs. Diffuse cultures**

People from **specific** cultures start with the elements, the specifics. First they analyse them separately, and then they put them back together again. In specific cultures, the whole is the sum of its parts. Each person's life is divided in many components: you can only enter one at a time. Interactions between people are highly purposeful and well defined. The public sphere of specific individuals is much larger than their private sphere. People are easily accepted into the public sphere, but it is very difficult to get into the private sphere, since each area in which two people encounter each other is considered separate from the other, a specific case. Specific individuals concentrate on hard facts, standards, contracts.

People from **diffusely** oriented cultures, on the other hand, start with the whole and see each element in perspective of the total, holistically. All elements are related to each other. These relationships are more important than each separate element; so the whole is more than just the sum of its elements. Diffuse individuals have a large private sphere and a small public one. Newcomers are not easily accepted into either. But once they have been accepted, they are admitted into all layers of the individual's life. A friend is a friend in all respects: tennis, cooking, work, etc. The various roles someone might play in your life are not separated. Qualities cherished by diffuse cultures include style, demeanour, ambiance, trust, understanding, etc.

5) **Achievement vs. Ascription**

Achieved status refers to what an individual does and has accomplished. In achievement-oriented cultures, individuals derive their status from what they have accomplished. A person with achieved status has to prove what he/she is worth over and over again: status is accorded on the basis of his/her actions.

Ascribed status, however, refers to what a person is and how others relate to his/her position in the community, in society or in an organisation. In an ascriptive society, individuals derive their status from birth, age, gender or wealth. A person with ascribed status does not have to achieve to retain his/her status: it is accorded to him/her on the basis of his/her being.

6) **Time perception**

Every culture has developed its own response to time. The time orientation dimension has two aspects: the relative importance cultures give to the **past, present, and future**, and their approach to structuring time.

Past-oriented cultures. If a culture is predominantly oriented towards the past, the future is seen as a repetition of past experiences. Respect for ancestors and collective historical experiences are characteristic of a past-oriented culture.

Present-oriented cultures. A predominantly present-oriented culture will not attach much value to common past experiences nor to future prospects. Day-by-day experiences tend to direct people's life.

Future-oriented cultures. In a future-oriented culture most human activities are directed toward future prospects. Generally, the past is not considered to

be vitally significant to a future state of affairs. Planning constitutes a major activity in future-oriented cultures.

Approach to structuring time: **Sequential** (monochronic) vs. **Synchronic** (polychronic) cultures. Time can be structured in two ways. In one approach time moves forward, second by second, minute by minute, hour by hour in a straight line. This is called sequentialism. In another approach time moves round in cycles: of minutes, hours, days, years. This is synchronism.

People structuring time **sequentially** tend to do one thing at a time. They view time as a narrow line of distinct, consecutive segments. Sequential people view time as tangible and divisible. They strongly prefer planning and keeping to plans once they have been made. Time commitments are taken seriously. Staying on schedule is a must.

On the contrary, people structuring time **synchronically** usually do several things at a time. To them, time is a wide ribbon, allowing many things to take place simultaneously. Time is flexible and intangible. Time commitments are desirable rather than absolute. Plans are easily changed. Synchronic people especially value the satisfactory completion of interactions with others.

Promptness depends on the type of relationship.

7) **Relation to nature**

Every culture has developed an attitude towards the natural environment. Survival has meant acting with or against nature. The way we relate to our environment is linked to the way we seek to have control over our own lives and over our destiny or fate.

Internalistic people have a mechanistic view of nature. They see nature as a complex machine and machines can be controlled if you have the right expertise. Internalistic people do not believe in luck or predestination. They are '**inner-directed**' - one's personal resolution is the starting point for every action. You can live the life you want to live if you take advantage of the opportunities. Man can dominate nature - if he makes the effort.

Externalistic people, on the other hand, have a more organic view of nature. Mankind is one of nature's forces, so should operate in harmony with the environment. Man should subjugate to nature and go along with its forces. Externalistic people do not believe that they can shape their own destiny. 'Nature moves in mysterious ways', and therefore you never know what will happen to you. The actions of externalistic people are '**outer-directed**' - adapted to external circumstances.

After examining the seven dimensions featuring clear cultural differences, let us now look at the next stage, the **Reconciliation model**. How do we or should we better accommodate the differences between our cultures and others with whom we are trying to communicate, work, do business or manage in an intercultural context?

Foreign cultures have an integrity, which only some of its members will abandon. People who abandon their culture become weakened and corrupt. We need others to be themselves if partnership is to work. This is why we need to reconcile differences, that is, to be ourselves, but yet see and understand how the others' perspectives can help our own.

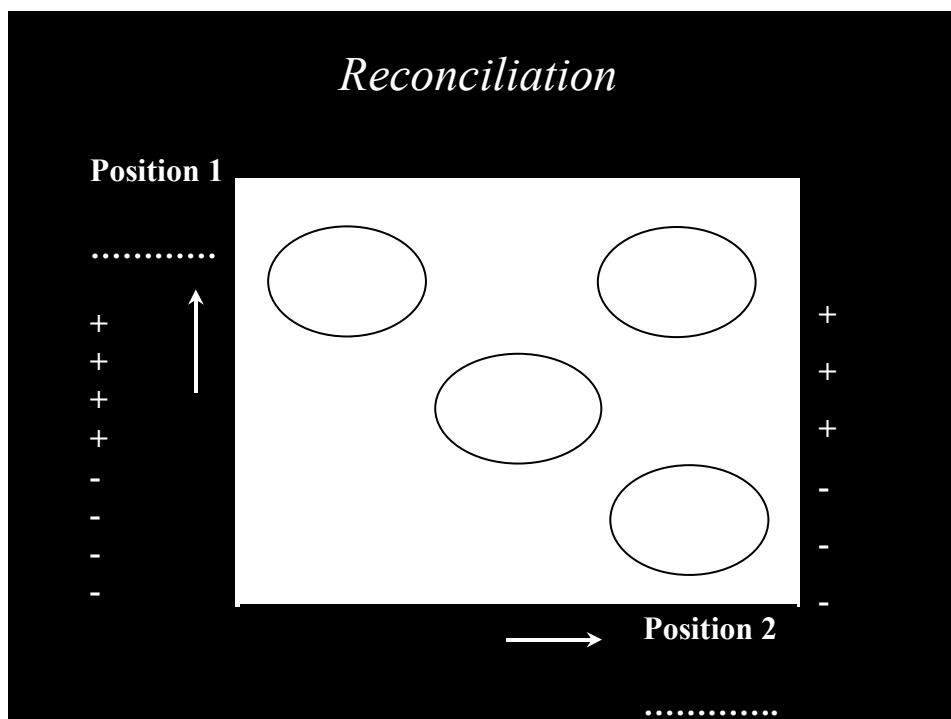
Once you are aware of your own mental models and cultural predispositions (see first step in the three-step approach), and once you can respect and understand that those of another culture are legitimately different (see second step), then it becomes possible to reconcile differences. Why do this? Because we are in the context of creating wealth and value, not just for ourselves, but also for those who live in different cultural worlds. We need to share the value of communicating or working in partnership. What is reconciliation? In dealing with different cultures, you have several options:

- **Ignoring** other cultures. One type of response is to ignore the other orientation (You sometimes hear: “there are no cultural differences, we are all alike”). You are sticking to your own cultural standpoint. Your style of decision-making is to either impose your own way of doing things because it is your belief that your way of doing things and your values are best, or because you have rejected other ways of thinking or doing things because you have either not recognised them or have no respect for them.
- **Abandon** your standpoint. Another response is to abandon your orientation and imitate the natives. Adopt a “when in Rome, do as Romans do” approach. Acting or keeping up such pretences will not go unseen - you will be very much an amateur. Other cultures will mistrust you - and you won't be able to offer your own strengths to the partnership.
- **Compromise**. Sometimes do it your way. Sometimes give in to the others. But this is a win-lose solution or even lose-lose solution. Compromise cannot lead to a solution in which both parties are satisfied -something has to be given, it can mean losing some of your own identity.
- **Reconciliation**. What is needed is an approach where the two opposing views can come to fuse or blend - where the strength of one extreme is extended by considering and accommodating the other. This is reconciliation.

Focusing on the topic of the workshop “Communication Across Cultures in Multicultural Cities” and in particular on the **interface of culture and the city** we can identify a few dilemmas that can be subject to reconciliation. One example is offered by another presenter at the workshop, Ljiljana Deru Simic. In her abstract on the topic she argues that: “It is more than evident that social field and economic field are not separated from cultural one, beside the tendency that is to put them in opposition as artists and the world rather than artists in the world. Artists do not aim specifically at producing multicultural work, but since they are living in specific time, and since art is rooted in real life problems, the realities of everyday life are transposed into their work and emerge transformed where intercultural dimension reflects certain implementation on social, political and aesthetic levels in the cities.”

We will now look at a concrete example on a micro level of how to reconcile a dilemma. This is an exercise that makes it possible to run through the whole reconciliation process. We are taking two seemingly opposing attitudes of our daily professional lives, when we need to communicate cross-culturally. This is about communication and time management: **Face to Face Communication Vs. Screen to Screen Communication.**

The methodology used in this example is based on the 6 steps towards reconciliation, as developed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner. See the reconciliation grid below. It features the two starting positions (extremes) of the given dilemma: Position 1 and Position 2, and the four possible ending points: 1,10 or loose-win, 10,1 or win-loose, 5,5 or loose-loose/compromise and finally 10,10 or win-win/reconciliation.



The reconciliation Grid

We need now to go through the following steps:

Step 1: Eliciting the dilemma as proposed.

- Agree who is the dilemma holder (yourself for example dealing with face to face and screen to screen communication in an intercultural context).
- Which of the 7 dimensions fits this dilemma best?

The following dimensions can be identified: Diffuse vs. Specific, Affective vs. Neutral and Particularistic vs. Universalistic.

Step 2: Charting the dilemma.

- Label both axis with the 2 horns of the dilemma and add the relevant dimension following the vertical/horizontal convention. One can put the following dimensions in the vertical (1,10) axe "Face to Face": Diffuse, Affective and Particularistic. Accordingly, in the horizontal axe "Screen to Screen" put: Specific, Neutral and Universalistic.

Step 3: Stretching the dilemma

- Think of the positives (+) of Position 1 if the dilemma holder would fully honour that position. Then do the same for Position 2. Some of the positives for Position 1 (Face to Face) are: Builds relationship, feedback clarification, group building, resolving conflicts, use all senses, authenticity, personal delivery, full communication package, emotions, high quality context, etc. For position 2 (Screen to Screen) list: Documented, cheaper, consistent message, minimise language issues, allowing time for consideration, multiformat and lots of information, clarity, efficiency, time and location neutralised, reliable, etc.
- Think of the negatives (-) of Position 1 and Position 2 if the dilemma holder would fully honour that position. For Position 1: Expensive - money and time, frustration, escalation of conflicts, complicating simple matters due to context, requires same place and time, low reach and high cost, etc. For Position 2: Impersonal, no exploration of possible misunderstandings, not necessarily committed, one way communication, faceless, low context, information overkill, little feedback, etc.

Step 4: Finding epithets

- Find descriptive, funny, stigmatising, 'yucky' labels for the Positions (1,10) Face to face, (10,1) Screen to Screen and (5,5) Compromise. For defining the epithets try the following format: Sweet and sour, using the plusses and minuses defined during the previous step. Enter the group results into the proper buckets:
 - Face to Face (1,10): Frequent flyers, the Real Thing, pow wow, decision around the campfire, good feelings but no actions, etc.
 - Screen to Screen (10,1): Machine bound, remote management, management by e.mailing around, management by Outlook, etc.
 - Compromise (5,5): Chat room, telephone call, communication by web cam, e.mails with lots of smileys, etc.

Step 5: Reconciling the dilemma

- How can we combine the strengths of Position 1 Face to Face (1,10) with those of Position 2 Screen to Screen (10,1) and/or vice versa?
- Processing, by adding the -ing form to make the process more active, for example: Using all your senses, changing assumptions and behaviour, requiring same place and time, neutralising time and location, fragmenting information, etc.
 - Sequencing, by going from Position 1 to Position 2: Broadband communications (1) and clear, efficient, fast, easier to keep a record, timeless, store and forward messages (2) or high quality context (1) and availability and

accessibility (2). This is also often applied in the verbal communication using the strategy known as: "Yes..., but..."

- Contextualising, by drawing pictures and frames to illustrate the dilemma at stake. Here cartoons featuring the positives and negatives of each position may well prove clearer to the dilemma holder and others than any long verbal description.

- Synergising, by implementing Position 1 through Position 2 and vice-versa. For example: implementing a full communication package (1) through total availability and accessibility where time and location are neutralised (2) or anonymity (2) through authenticity by personal delivery (1), etc.

Enter the group result into the (10,10) bucket:

- "Meet, maintain, monitor" as a possible project policy.

- Apply Face to Face as catalyst for series of Screen to Screen communications and vice versa.

- Use the holographic web cam or mobile telephones with a camera and display.

- Use e.mail to reinforce Face to face messages as a standard procedure.

Step 6: Implementing the new design (Action Plan)

What actions should be undertaken to realise this reconciliation? Some suggestions:

- Set up kick-off meetings, set ground rules.

- Build trust in Face to Face sessions or with fission-fusion dynamic programmes.

- Personalise e.mail communications by setting ground rules: build emotional filters but also agree not to use blind copies, put your picture when high emotional content is present, etc.

- Develop web-conferencing as a support to real Face to Face.

- Use international English for e.mails.

Manage and monitor the effectiveness of the new design, evaluate on intermediary basis, and make appropriate changes where necessary.

On a macro level, we find examples of dilemmas that have been reconciled: the way we apply **best practices** in daily work and cooperation across Europe. Indeed, most European countries share a common history of many wars, but also of political alliances and long political, economic or cultural cooperation. This has shaped solid common frames of references that can result in an evolving euro-management model. Its characteristics are:

- Based on our differences but also on the many similarities in our cultures, the ability of managing **international diversity** and combine it with **local integration**, i.e. one can feel European, but also British, French or German;

- A strong sense of social responsibility, which shows in extensive schemes of social protection, and orientation towards people as actors in the business process. Companies also have a **social role**, not only **profit** as a *raison d'être*, employees look for a balance between their social life and their commitment to their work;

- Less formal management systems combining **long-term planning** with **short-term flexibility**, leadership with management and **individuality** with

teamwork. These systems are flexible enough to be transferred and adapted locally.

Typical for this model are the following skills -see step (b) Respect: capacity to change, open mindset, ability to learn from others, adapting their ways to your own situation, an entrepreneurial spirit and communication skills, including speaking foreign languages.

Conclusions: Although not every single dilemma is reconcilable –whether in work or in other situations- we have seen examples of how to reach some degree of reconciliation. Of course, in these examples or in others each individual gives his/her own interpretation and application according to personal sensibility and (cultural) sensitivity. Beside this personal input, one can argue that each individual would also propose solutions according to national, professional and corporate background. On all these levels, there might be general tendencies to (un)consciously prefer one position to the other, or to preferably start from Position 1 and then move to the other or the other way around on the way to reconciliation. On the national level, the process may show more universal or individual characteristics or, on the contrary, more particularistic or communitarian ones. On the professional level, one can expect differences in the approach of the whole dilemma and the process engaged between, say, an engineer and an artist. Likewise, on the corporate level, company policies in, for example, verbal and electronic communications will influence the process and the result. Consequently, depending on the people involved in the process, the final result may prove different but just as valuable, too. In other words, there is no ideal reconciliation and the individual will always put his or her own footprint on the process. Whether it is the direct verbal communication or the electronic communication that will prevail, it will always remain a human (inter)action.

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- (l) This paper was presented at the Workshop “Growth, Environmental Policies and Sustainability” organised by the Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei, Venice, June 1, 2001
- (li) This paper was presented at the Fourth Toulouse Conference on Environment and Resource Economics on “Property Rights, Institutions and Management of Environmental and Natural Resources”, organised by Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei, IDEI and INRA and sponsored by MATE, Toulouse, May 3-4, 2001
- (lii) This paper was presented at the International Conference on “Economic Valuation of Environmental Goods”, organised by Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei in cooperation with CORILA, Venice, May 11, 2001
- (liii) This paper was circulated at the International Conference on “Climate Policy – Do We Need a New Approach?”, jointly organised by Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei, Stanford University and Venice International University, Isola di San Servolo, Venice, September 6-8, 2001
- (liv) This paper was presented at the Seventh Meeting of the Coalition Theory Network organised by the Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei and the CORE, Université Catholique de Louvain, Venice, Italy, January 11-12, 2002
- (lv) This paper was presented at the First Workshop of the Concerted Action on Tradable Emission Permits (CATEP) organised by the Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei, Venice, Italy, December 3-4, 2001
- (lvi) This paper was presented at the ESF EURESCO Conference on Environmental Policy in a Global Economy “The International Dimension of Environmental Policy”, organised with the collaboration of the Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei, Acquafredda di Maratea, October 6-11, 2001
- (lvii) This paper was presented at the First Workshop of “CFEWE – Carbon Flows between Eastern and Western Europe”, organised by the Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei and Zentrum für Europäische Integrationsforschung (ZEI), Milan, July 5-6, 2001
- (lviii) This paper was presented at the Workshop on “Game Practice and the Environment”, jointly organised by Università del Piemonte Orientale and Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei, Alessandria, April 12-13, 2002
- (lix) This paper was presented at the ENGIME Workshop on “Mapping Diversity”, Leuven, May 16-17, 2002
- (lx) This paper was presented at the EuroConference on “Auctions and Market Design: Theory, Evidence and Applications”, organised by the Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei, Milan, September 26-28, 2002
- (lxi) This paper was presented at the Eighth Meeting of the Coalition Theory Network organised by the GREQAM, Aix-en-Provence, France, January 24-25, 2003
- (lxii) This paper was presented at the ENGIME Workshop on “Communication across Cultures in Multicultural Cities”, The Hague, November 7-8, 2002

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